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**PHA KHAMCHAN  
VIRACHITTA MAHA THELA**  
AND THE PRESERVATION OF THE  
LAO CULTURAL HERITAGE IN  
LUANG PRABANG, LAOS

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KHAMVONE BOULYAPHONH

## PHA KHAMCHAN VIRACHITTA MAHA THELA AND THE PRESERVATION OF THE LAO CULTURAL HERITAGE IN LUANG PRABANG, LAOS

**ABSTRACT** Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela, the late abbot of Vat Saen Sukharam and chairman of the Buddhist Fellowship Organization of the province of Luang Prabang, was one of the most outstanding Lao intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Venerable Abbot was a charismatic monk who served as a model for many monks and novices in Luang Prabang, who tried to emulate him. He was highly respected by the people of the old royal capital of Luang Prabang, which has been the spiritual centre of Lao Buddhism since ancient times and the seat of the Supreme Patriarch until 1975. Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela's outstanding works include the constructions and reconstructions of Vat Saen Sukharam and many other monasteries in the style of modern Lao Lan Xang architecture. Moreover, the Venerable Abbot led numerous Buddhist ceremonies, rituals and other festivals in accordance with the rules of the Sangha. Finally, he was the decisive figure to set up the Buddhist Archive of Photography in Luang Prabang (2007) and the Museum of Buddhist Art at Vat Saen Sukharam.

Based on a large corpus of historic photographs, manuscripts, documents, personal letters, as well as Buddhist art objects which the Venerable Abbot kept at his monastery over a period of more than fifty years, this paper aims at studying monastic life in Luang Prabang by focusing on the intellectual biography of Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela.

The aim of this paper is to present the biography of Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela<sup>1</sup> (1920–2007), who was a renowned and charismatic monk in Luang Prabang and one of the most prominent monks of the Sangha of Laos in the twentieth century. Not least, his work has contributed significantly to the preservation of the Lao cultural heritage in Luang Prabang, Laos.

He was the late abbot of Vat Saen Sukharam (1949–2007), the ecclesiastical provincial governor of Luang Prabang (1953–1966), and the chairman of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization of the Province of Luang Prabang (LBFO, 1976–2007). He was a highly venerated monk and an outstanding personality with regards to his teachings of the Buddhist doctrine, his exemplary life as a novice and monk, his contribution to the construction of monasteries, as well as his social and monastic roles in Luang Prabang during most of the twentieth century. He strictly practiced the monastic discipline and followed the teachings of the Buddha.

His profound knowledge of the ancient Lao culture and of its unique traditions and festivals – which form the Lao identity and which he felt were in danger to vanish – inspired him to initiate the establishment of the museum of Buddhist art and culture in Vat Saen Sukharam in 2004, and the

<sup>1</sup> In Lao (as well as in Thai and Cambodian) Buddhism, honorific titles are used for monks, such as pha and thela. Pha derives from brah, which is pronounced phra in Thai and derives from Pali: vara (meaning “supreme, splendid”. Thela, pronounced “thera” in Thai, derives from Pali: therā (meaning “elder”), whereas Thai, at least in its written form, preserves the consonant /r/ and the consonant cluster /phr/. In Lao /r/ is transformed into /l/ in all Pali and Sanskrit derived words, while the consonant cluster /phr/ is reduced to /ph/. This phonetic feature of modern Lao explains the spelling and pronunciation of the two terms discussed above.

Buddhist Archive of Photography of Luang Prabang in 2006, to systematically collect historic documents, photographs and art objects related to Lao Buddhist culture and tradition. He had a museum building constructed on the premises of Vat Saen Sukharam in Luang Prabang in 2004, with the aim of exhibiting his collections of Buddhist art objects for the younger generations to study the history of Lao Buddhism.

This paper will describe three aspects which made Pha Khamchan a very important and famous monk: Firstly, as the ecclesiastical provincial governor and chairman of the LBFO, he was a central figure of the Sangha of Luang Prabang; secondly, his strict practice of the monastic rules and adherence to the Vinaya made him well known and highly respected; thirdly, he was a great collector and preservationist of the Lao cultural heritage and built a bridge between ancient and modern Lao Buddhist culture.

In 1990, I was ordained as novice at Vat Pa Phon Phao, a forest monastery located in the outskirts of Luang Prabang. In 1992, I moved to Vat Saen Sukharam and stayed there until 1996 as Pha Khamchan's disciple. After the evening chanting he would regularly give talks to instruct the monks and novices on the Buddhist teachings, monastic doctrines, and the monastic life. Sometimes he recollected episodes of his own biography to serve as a role model for a monk's behavior, while also talking about the history and ancient culture of Laos. Starting in 2006, after I began working as a manager for the project "the Buddhist Archive of Photography in Luang Prabang, Laos", with the German writer and photographer Hans Georg Berger, I made several interviews with Pha Khamchan to gather information about photographs from his collections.

In 2011, the research project "The Lao Sangha and Modernity", directed by Prof. Dr. Volker Grabowsky, Hamburg, was initiated at the "Buddhist Archive of Photography". The project researches, digitizes, partly translates and safeguards the documents from the collections of Pha Khamchan, including official documents, personal letters, books, magazines and manuscripts. It is carried out in collaboration with the National Library of Laos, the Provincial government and the Asia-Africa Institute of the University of Hamburg, Germany.<sup>2</sup> The project will continue until March 2015. I am involved in the project as a researcher, while simultaneously pursuing my PhD study.

The main data for this paper came from resources based on Pha Khamchan's biography (Viradhammo/Boulyaphonh, Khamvone, Pha 2004) and interviews with him. Other data is based on his collec-

tions of historic photographs, personal letters, documents, as well as interviews with senior monks and lay persons who were related or close to him.

## BIOGRAPHY OF PHA KHAMCHAN VIRACITTA MAHA THELA

Pha Khamchan Viracitta Maha Thela, also known as Sathu Nyai Khamchan, Sathu Nyai<sup>3</sup> Vat Saen or Pha Khamchan, was born under the name of Khamchan Virachit on 23 September 1920 (B.E. 2463) at Ban Lakkham village (present-day Ban Vat Saen village) in Luang Prabang, Laos. He came from a noble and devout Buddhist family.



Illustration Nr. 1: Archive Nr. A4338R.

Reproduction from the painting of Achan Thongdi (1962-1926), grandfather of Pha Khamchan in the uniform of Chao Phaya Luang Mueangchan. There is type and handwritten on the verso of this photograph "ເຈົ້າພະຍາຫລວງເມືອງຈັນທຣ "ອາຈານຍ ທອງດີ" ມີຮະນະ ປີ ຄ.ສ.1926 ອາຍຸ 64 ປີ" "Chao Phaya Luang Mueangchan "Achan Thongdi" died in A.D. 1926, at the age of 64".

<sup>3</sup> Sathu (Pali: *sādhū*: good, good man, holy man), local honorary title used to refer to or address a Buddhist monk who has passed the *Thelabhiseka* (watering ceremony). This ceremony is conducted by the lay community to honor monks they consider especially worthy of respect. Before a monk has passed the *Thelabhiseka*, he is called *Chao Mom* or *Pha*. The title *Nyai* (Lao: *nyai*: great, big) is an honorary title awarded to monks ordained for over twenty years. Therefore, the title *Sathu Nyai* is used for a senior monk who has been a monk for more than twenty years.

<sup>2</sup> The project is part of a larger German research network, dealing with "Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia", DORISEA, coordinated at the University of Göttingen. See: [www.dorisea.net](http://www.dorisea.net).





Illustration Nr. 2: Archive Nr. A4332R

Mrs. Khamsuk (1863-1943), Nang Chao Phaya Luang Mueangchan of Ban Lakkham village, Luang Prabang, grandmother of Pha Khamchan dressing as a Nun presenting her identity as a very devout Buddhist. The photograph was probably taken in the late 1930s.



Illustration Nr. 3: Archive Nr. B0228R

Pha Kaenchan Kaccāṇana Maha Thela (1893-1943), the former abbot of Vat Saen Sukharam, He was Pha Khamchan's Buddhist master, passed away at Vat Saen Sukharam in 1943, at the age of 51. This photograph was taken in 1933 at the age of 40.



Illustration Nr. 4: Archive Nr. B0544R

Khamchan Virachit (left, [Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela]), at the age of 6 in 1926. There is a handwritten of Pha Khamchan's handwritten on the photograph: [From left to right] ຄຳຈັນທຣ໌ ອາຍຸ 6 ປີ, ຜູ້ ອາຍຸ 10 ປີ, ສາທູໂຫຼງແພງ ອາຍຸ 24 ປີ ຖ້າຍເມື່ອປີ ຄ.ສ. 1926 Khamchan at the age of 6, Phu at the age of 10 and Sathu Nyai Phaeng [of Vat Saen Sukharam] at the age of 24 taken in A.D. 1926. This photograph shows that he was already a temple boy at that time.



Illustration Nr. 5: Archive Nr. B1112R

Novice Khamchan Virachit (Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela), at the age of 14 in 1934.

His grandfather, Achan Thongdi (1862–1926) had the rank of Chao Phaya Luang Mueangchan<sup>4</sup> (Illustration Nr. 1) and was a privy counselor at the royal court. At that time, Somdet Pha Chao Sisavang Vong (1885–1959) was king of the Lao Kingdom of Luang Prabang, which had been a French protectorate since 1893.

Khamchan Virachit was the youngest of five children of Mr. Thit Khamtan (*Phia Muexa*) from Ban Aphay and Mrs. Khamonsi (1890–1925)<sup>5</sup> from Ban Lakkham village. Unfortunately, his mother died when he was only four years old. In 1927, at the age of seven, he entered primary school in Luang Prabang where he was educated bilingually in Lao and French. During school vacations, his grandmother, Mrs. Khamsuk (1863–1943) (Illustration Nr. 2), sent him to Vat Saen, the monastery of their city quarter, as a temple boy (Illustration Nr. 4). Thus he became a disciple of Pha Kaenchan Kaccāṇana Maha Thela (1893–1943; Illustration Nr. 3), abbot of Vat Saen. From him he learned the traditional Lao Buddhist and monastic ways of life. He served his master, Pha Kaenchan, by boiling water for drinking and by cleaning his abode (Lao: *kutī*) and other places in the monastery. He also learned to read and write the Lao-Tham script (Lao: *tua aksòṇ tham lao*) from his master and from his brother, Khamphan Virachit (1914–1995), who was a novice at Vat Pa Fang. Thus he was able to read and write the Lao-Tham script from an early age on. Since he was a clever and serious boy, his master loved him as his foster child. In 1932, he was ordained as a novice at Vat Saen for two and a half months during his school vacations.

In 1934, he was again ordained as a novice (Illustration Nr. 5) at Vat Saen in a ceremony presided over by his master, Pha Kaenchan Kaccāṇana Maha Thela. He stayed there for some time and then moved to Vat Pa Fang where his brother was, novice Khamphan. There he studied the Dhamma, i.e., the teachings of the Buddha, and Pali, the sacred language of the Thelavada Buddhist canon. In 1936, he was sent to Vat Benchamabophit in Bangkok, Thailand (Illustration Nr. 6), to study *Pha Pariyattitham* (the Buddhist scriptures based on the Dhamma). He finished *nak tham tho* (the second of three levels of the Dhamma studies) and Pali grammar (the second of nine levels of Pali studies). In 1937, he returned

to Luang Prabang where he disrobed to work in his family's business. Illustration Nr. 7 shows Khamchan in laity dressing.

According to Lao tradition, a man who has completed the age of twenty should be ordained as a Buddhist monk and stay in the monastery for some time to learn and practice the Buddhist teachings and Lao traditions. Monkhood is believed to be an expression of gratitude to his parents, particularly to the monk's mother who gave birth to him and nourished him. Lao tradition regards a man who was ordained as a monk as *khon suk* (trained person), while a man who never ordained is referred to as *khon dip*<sup>6</sup> (untrained person). Khamchan Virachit was ordained as a monk at the age of 21 on 9 June 1941 at Vat Saen, together with his cousin, Khamphay Buppha (1917–2009), who became a deputy Minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lao P.D.R after the Lao revolution (1975) and held this position until 1982. They were ordained by the Somdet Pha Sangkhalat Dhammaṇa Maha Thela (Bunthan Bupphalat, 1892–1984), the Supreme Patriarch of Laos, from Vat Mai Suvannaphumaram, who was also his Pha Upajjhāya (preceptor) (Illustration Nr. 8 and 9). Khamchan Virachit was bestowed with the Buddhist epithet "*Viracitto*", which literally means "a person whose mind is full of perseverance and courage". After ordaining he stayed with his master at Vat Saen for some time before moving to Vat Pa Fang to join his brother in further studies in Buddhist discipline, *sutta*, *pātimokkha*, and the chanting of the Vessantara Jataka.

Initially, he thought that he would live as a monk for just one year, and then disrobe to work in his family's business which was going very well. However, when he studied and practiced the Buddhist teachings and followed his preceptor, the Supreme Patriarch, to practice Vipassana meditation in forest retreats and participated in the Sangha's activities, he abandoned the idea of disrobing. He moved back to Vat Saen after his early Buddhist master, Pha Kaenchan, had passed away in 1943 and was appointed as abbot of Vat Saen in 1949. In 1954, he was appointed as ecclesiastical provincial governor of Luang Prabang by King Sisavang Vong. Thereafter, he played a key role in the administration of the Sangha of Luang Prabang by re-establishing the monastic routines (*kiccāvata*) which the monks and novices must follow, and by developing the Buddhist education of the province by setting up Pali schools in the remote rural districts around Luang Prabang, such as Mueang Xiang Nguen, Mueang Nan, Mueang Hun and Mueang Xay (Udomxay). He participated in the world Buddhist fellowship conference and Sixth

<sup>4</sup> Chao Phaya Luang Mueangchan was the rank title of the "left chief official" in the civilian rule of the Kingdom of Laos. It was appointed by the King. The Chao Phaya Luang Mueangchan was in charge of the country's military. This position had been established in the 17<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of the King Suriyavongsa Dhammikarat (Buasisavat 1993) and existed until the Kingdom of Laos formed its government in 1945. The title Chao Phaya (dignity) was used for state officials from the royal family. Even though he was a commoner, this title was awarded to him.

<sup>5</sup> A document, with Archive Nr. BAD-02-0028, in handwritten in Lao-old script, "*Pravatti Khong Khamonsi*: biography of Khamonsi".

<sup>6</sup> *Khon*: man, person *dip*: raw and *suk*: ripe. *Khon suk* stands for a man who is trained in Buddhist teachings and learned monastic Lao traditions. It is believed that a *khon suk* can distinguish between good and bad. He is said to be docile and is compared to a piece of clay which can be molded into any form.





Illustration Nr. 6: Archive Nr. B0315R

Monks and novices of Vat Benchamaborpit, Bangkok, Thailand in B.E. 2479 (A.D. 1936). Novice Khamchan Virachit (Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela, the 5th from right in front row), first year of his Buddhist study in Bangkok.



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Illustration Nr. 7: Archive Nr. A0197R

Khamchan Virachit as layman in a studio in Luang Prabang, his handwriting on the photograph "ຄຳຈັນທຣ໌ ວິຣະຈິຕຣ໌ ຖືກເຜີຍອາຍຸໄດ້ ໒໐ ປີ ໑໙໔໐" "Khamchan Virachit taken at the age of 20 in 1940"



Illustration Nr. 8: Archive Nr. A3290R

Nak procession before ordination ceremony on 9 June 1941, Khamchan Virachit riding on the white horse posing for a portrait with his friend in front of the temple hall of Vat Saen. Most of them dress in the Lao Lan Xang uniform. Khamchan's riding on the white horse emulates the great departure of Prince Sitthatha (Gotama Buddha) with the horse Kandhaka for his ordination.



Illustration Nr. 9: Archive Nr. A3406R

The ordination ceremony process in the temple hall of Vat Saen on 9 June 1941, Nak Khamchan Virachit (left) and Nak Khamphay Buppha (right) kneeling with raising their hands and holding Tici-vara in front of Somdet Pha Sangkhalat Dhammañana Maha Thela who is their preceptor and asking him for ordination among the assembly of 30 monks.



Illustration Nr. 10: Archive Nr. A0178R

Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela posing in front of a small wooden hut where he stayed in Parivāsakam practice at Vat Pa Phon Phao in 1998. The hut was built by the family of Mrs. Vilayvan for transferring merit to Mr. Bunchan Phommalin, a dead relative.

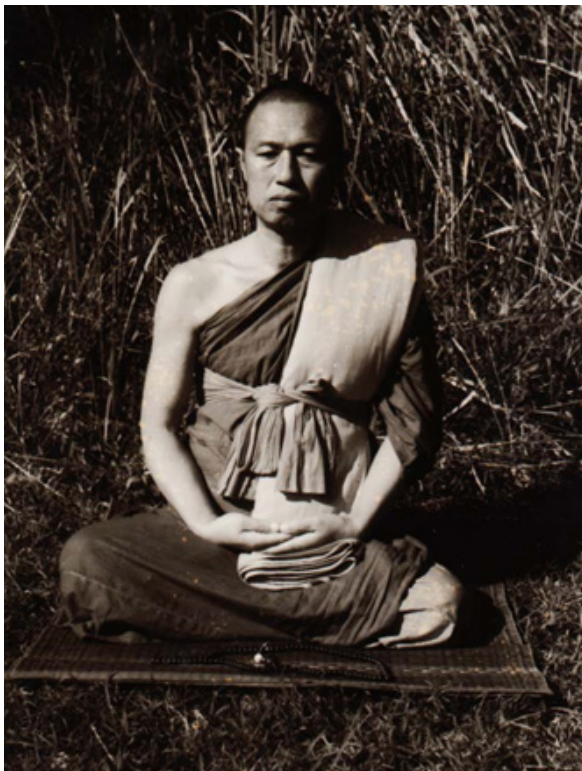


Illustration Nr. 12: Archive Nr. A0836R

Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela is practicing the 10th of the 13 of Dhutaṅga practices, the so-called Abbhokāsikaṅga: open-air-dweller's practice or staying in the open space in the jungle of Xiang Maen village opposite of Luang Prabang town, Chomphet district, Luang Prabang province in the winter of 1960.



Illustration Nr. 11: Archive Nr. B0552R

Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela is practicing the 9th of the 13 of Dhutaṅga practices, the so-called Rukkhamūlikaṅga: tree-root-dweller's practice or staying under the tree in the jungle of Xiang Maen village in the opposite of Luang Prabang town, Chomphet district, Luang Prabang province in the winter of 1957.



Buddhist Council in Rangoon, Burma, in 1954, and the celebration of the 2500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Buddha Jayanti in Sri Lanka in 1956. He was strongly involved in the transcription of the Pali canon (*Tipitaka*) in Lao-Tham script in 1957. In 1959, he received the honorary title “Pha Lakkham Viravisutthikhun”<sup>7</sup> from the king, and in 2002 he received the honorary title “Aggamaha Satdhamma Jotikadhaja”<sup>8</sup> from the Sangha of the Union of Myanmar. The title is offered to senior monks who are considered outstanding in religious practices and Buddhist studies.

After the Lao revolution of 1975, the administrative system of the Sangha Organization was automatically abolished along with the regime of the country. In 1976, the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization (LBFO) was established in Vientiane; Pha Khamchan was elected by the Sangha of Luang Prabang as their leader and appointed the chairman of LBFO of the province of Luang Prabang, a position he maintained until his death on 9 July 2007. Since the 1990s, the country has been opened to the outside world, and in 1995 Luang Prabang was named world heritage site by the UNESCO. Pha Khamchan was a central figure in the organization of the related Buddhist rituals and ceremonies. He not only lead the Sangha and lay community in the organization of these events, but also counseled state officials seeking advice on the organization of Lao festivals in accordance with ancient Lao tradition, because he was often the only person with knowledge about certain traditions.

After his death, the large collections of manuscripts, photographs, documents and art objects which Pha Khamchan had assembled and kept in his monastic abode were protected and registered by the local government of Luang Prabang province and the Sangha of Luang Prabang. Two committees were set up for taking care of them. The first committee is called ຄະນະກຳມະການກວດກາເງິນ-ຄຳ ແລະວັດຖຸສິ່ງຂອງມີຄ່າຂອງສາທາລະນະ (Committee for Checking Money, Gold and Valuable Objects of Pha Khamchan).<sup>9</sup> This committee was established one month after his death to sift through and register his collections. The second committee is called ຄະນະກຳມະການຄຸ້ມຄອງແລະປົກປັກຮັກສາເງິນ-ຄຳ ແລະວັດຖຸສິ່ງຂອງມີຄ່າຂອງສາທາລະນະ ວິຣະຈິດຕະ ມະຫາເຖລະ ວັດແສນ ສຸຂາຣາມ (Committee for Safeguarding and Protecting Money, Gold and Valuable Objects of Pha

Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela, Vat Saen Sukhar-am).<sup>10</sup> This committee is presided over by the chairman of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization of the province of Luang Prabang and is still active.

## RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Pha Khamchan was a monk who strictly practiced the “*kiccāvatta*” (religious routine), which are the monastic rules monks and novices have to follow in their daily life. This strongly contributed to his reputation among monks, novices and lay people. He also encouraged and inspired the other monks in Luang Prabang to have the same standards in their disciplines. In his talks, he regularly reminded them to strictly adhere to the *kiccāvatta* and explained their importance. Whenever he observed monks or novices behaving improperly, he immediately reminded them of the disciplines. Pha Khamchan followed all ten *kiccāvattas*:

**Upasot** (Pali: *uposatha*), twice a month, at *uposot* days, the fifteenth day of the waxing and waning moon, the monks meet in the temple hall for the obligatory recitation of the *pātimokkha*, “the fundamental precepts”. These 227 precepts are binding rules for the Bhikkhus. Pha Khamchan organized and presided over that ceremony in Vat Saen and sometimes recited the text himself. He established a manuscript<sup>11</sup> of the *pātimokkha* in Lao-Tham script (BAD-13-2-066) which he compiled from various sections of ancient palm-leaf and mulberry paper manuscripts in Luang Prabang. He asked Pha Phò Phan Bhodhipañño, abbot of Vat Pa Siaw (Hat Siaw) who was known for his beautiful handwriting, to calligraph the manuscript. When finished, he sent the manuscript to the Minister of Religious Affairs in Vientiane to be published in the form of mulberry paper manuscript (*phapsa*) and distributed it throughout the country in B.E. 2504 (A.D. 1961).

**Binhabāt** (Pali: *piṇḍapāta*), to go for alms-gathering. After chanting and meditating in the early morning, Pha Khamchan used to walk at the head of hundreds of monks and novices for alms-collecting. Every day of his 66 years of monkhood he followed this monastic practice and discipline which was not common for a monk in a high position. Somebody once said to him “you do not need to go for alms-col-

<sup>7</sup> *Lakkham* means “gold post”, but in this context was the title for a monk who was the ecclesiastical provincial governor. *Viravisutthikhun* means “a person whose mind is full of goodness, purity and courage”.

<sup>8</sup> Literal meaning: “person who greatly displays the prosperity of the Saddhamma (true doctrine)”. In 2014, the Sangha of Myanmar offered this honorary title to another Lao senior monk, Pha Achan Vet Masenai, abbot of Vat Sisaket, a deputy chairman of the Central Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization in Vientiane.

<sup>9</sup> ຂໍ້ຕົກລົງຂອງທ່ານເຈົ້າແຂວງ ແຂວງຫຼວງພະບາງ ເລກທີ 627/ຂສ.ຫຼບ ລົງວັນທີ 28 ສິງຫາ 2007 Decree of the governor of the province of Luang Prabang, Nr. 627/ຂສ.ຫຼບ on 28 August 2007.

<sup>10</sup> ຂໍ້ຕົກລົງຂອງທ່ານເຈົ້າແຂວງ ແຂວງຫຼວງພະບາງ ເລກທີ 671/ຂສ.ຫຼບ ລົງວັນທີ 18 ກັນຍາ 2007 Decree of the governor of the province of Luang Prabang, Nr. 671/ຂສ.ຫຼບ on 18 September 2007.

<sup>11</sup> This manuscript was discovered in his *kuti* in 2009 by the team of the Buddhist Archive of Photography. It has been published in a facsimile edition that accompanies a portfolio of photographs by Hans Georg Berger, published by the Belgian publisher Salto Ulbeek Publishing, in 2011. Eight-hundred copies of this facsimile edition have been distributed to monasteries all over Laos by the National Library as a Dhamma gift of the author.

lecting because the people will bring you rice and food to the monastery". He replied: "It is our duty since the Buddha told us to do so; we have to follow the duty. Walking in the morning is good for exercise".<sup>12</sup> Nowadays, Luang Prabang is well known as the city where hundreds of monks and novices from various monasteries walk through the streets to collect alms every morning.

**Waipha sutmon** (pay respect to the Buddha and chanting) is an important routine for monks and novices, as is *binthabāt*. Pha Khamchan always got up in the early morning at 4 a.m. for chanting and Vipassana meditation together with his disciples in the *sim* (temple hall). In the afternoon they gathered at 5.30 p.m. in the big *sala* (pavilion) for evening chanting. After that he often discoursed on the Dhamma and Vinayain order to instruct his disciples.

**Kuat vihān lan chedi** (cleaning the monastic grounds). Pha Khamchan was a monk who loved cleanliness and orderliness. During his lifetime, Vat Saen Sukharam looked very clean and pleasant, because every morning and afternoon monks and novices had to sweep the yards and places of worship in the monastery. He used to walk around to monitor the cleanliness; if he saw a place which was dirty or cluttered he would immediately give an order to a novice or a monk to take care.

**Haksā phākhong** (Pali: *ticivara*), to keep the three robes of a monk always close during the night and to wear them in the early morning. The *ticivārā* consists of the under robe (*sa bong*), the upper robe (*chī vòn*) and the outer robe (*sangkha*). According to the Buddhist tradition, and as mentioned in the Vinaya, a monk has to keep these robes close to him at night, and wear them in the early morning. Pha Khamchan kept these three robes with him wherever he went. He wore them in the early morning for chanting and changed the robes before going for alms-collecting and again in the afternoon for evening chanting. He dressed his robes in the proper way and kept them in good order at all times. Thus he was a model for the traditional dressing of monks in Luang Prabang. When he saw some novices walking on the streets and not wearing the robes in the correct and appropriate way, he asked his driver to stop the car and told them "please dress in an appropriate and correct way"<sup>13</sup>. He composed and published the Vinaya book, part I, and in between the chapters he put images of a monk dressed in the correct way to serve as a model, and distributed this book for free as a Dhamma gift.

**Khao parivāsakam** (Pali: *parivāsakam*: probation), the religious ritual retreat of purification. In

case any Bhikkhu has violated the Vinaya on *sanghādisesa āpatti* (rules entailing an initial and subsequent meeting of the Sangha)<sup>14</sup>, which contains thirteen articles, and conceals his misconduct, he must be quarantined in a specific place as long as the period of his conceal; he must declare his misbehavior among the assembly of monks, stating which article of *sanghādisesa āpatti* he has violated. Then he asks the Sangha for the end of the punishment and the Sangha would recite the declaration for his purification. At present days, the *parivāsakam* practice is considered a tradition. It is practiced in groups during a specific period in December for ten days and is known as *khao parivāsakam*. This practice is slightly different from the original as it is written in the Vinaya. Pha Khamchan recounted that, nowadays, most monks would be too ashamed to confess their misconduct, or, for a lack of knowledge of the Vinaya, might not even be aware of it. The *parivāsakam* practice in groups gave those monks an opportunity to purify themselves. Furthermore, Pha Khamchan observed that many monks did not know how to practice *parivāsakam* properly. He also established the tradition of *parivāsakam* in groups to teach the proper practice to them. It is often combined with *thudong*-practice (Pali: *dhutaṅga*)<sup>15</sup> and Vipassana meditation. Illustrations Nr. 11 and 12 show Pha Khamchan practicing *thudong*. Pha Khamchan practiced the *parivāsakam* (Illustration Nr. 10) and Vipassana meditation in forest retreats. Since 1941, his first year of monkhood, he had been trained in meditation by his preceptor, Somdet Pha Sangkhalat Dhammañana Maha Thela. As the leading monk of the Sangha in the 1990s, he established *parivāsakam* as a regular annual ritual in December at Vat Pa Phon Phao Vanaram. This practice is followed by the Sangha of Luang Prabang up to the present day.

**Thaephom tatlep**: Shaving hair and beard and cutting nails. Particularly, monks and novices should keep their hair and nails short. They shave their head once a month on the fourteenth day of the waxing moon of lunar month, called "*van kon*" (shaving day). Pha Khamchan did that in quite a

<sup>14</sup> Seen Berger 2011, translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

<sup>15</sup> *Dhutaṅga* means shaking off or moving defilements; austere practices; ascetic practices. The *dhutaṅga* contains thirteen items of practices, which are the following: 1. *paṇisukūlikaṅga*: refuse-rug-wearer's practice, 2. *tecivārikaṅga*: triple-robe-wearer's practice, 3. *piṇḍapātikaṅga*: alms-food-eater's practice, 4. *sapadānacārikaṅga*: house-to-house-seeker's practice, 5. *ekāsanikaṅga*: one-sessioner's practice, 6. *pattapiṇḍikaṅga*: bowl-food-eater's practice, 7. *khalupacchābhattikaṅga*: later-food-refuser's practice, 8. *ārañṇikaṅga*: forest-dweller's practice, 9. *rukkhamūlikaṅga*: tree-root-dweller's practice, 10. *abbhokāsikaṅga*: open-air-dweller's practice, 11. *sosānikaṅga*: charnel-ground-dweller's practice, 12. *yathāsanthatikaṅga*: any-bed-user's practice, and 13. *nesajjikaṅga*: sitter's practice. (P.A. Payutto 2012 [2555]: 256–257). A monk who practices *dhutaṅga* chooses one or more of these items.

<sup>12</sup> Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela recounted this event to me while we were talking about *binthabāt* at his abode in Vat Saen Sukharam in 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Khampom Phongsavanh, one of Pha Khamchan's close disciples at Vat Pa Pha O, Luang Prabang in March 2013.

particular way: while having his head shaved by another monk he asked the monk to pull the razor up and down in order to cut the hair off completely. When a monk or novice came to meet him at his abode for conversation or to ask for help and he saw that his nails were long, he immediately gave him a nail clipper and told him to cut his nails and make them short before talking to him.

**Sueksā thamma vinai:** Studying the Dhamma (doctrine) and Vinaya (discipline). Pha Khamchan was one of the Lao intellectuals well trained in Buddhism and Lao history, especially in relation to Luang Prabang. The books, magazines, manuscripts and documents he studied and read were written in various languages, such as Lao, Lao-Tham, Pali, and Thai; they mostly relate to the Buddhist teachings, monastic disciplines and religious rituals. After his death we found a large collection of books, documents, and palm-leaf and mulberry paper manuscripts in his abode (*kuti*) which served as his monastic library. Particularly, during the three months of the Buddhist lent, he often lectured on the Dhamma and Vinaya to his disciples after evening chanting. In this way, he enabled his disciples to answer the questions of their teachers at the Buddhist schools' Dhamma classes. He produced many copies of Dhamma and Vinaya books in Lao script and distributed them to monks and novices for free as a Dhamma gift.

**Sadaeng ābat (āpatti)**<sup>16</sup> (Pali: *āpattiḍeṣanā*), the confession of an offence. The procedure is that two monks sit on their knees in front of each other and confess any offence of the Vinaya in Pali. First it is the turn of the younger one, later the older one follows. Pha Khamchan practiced this after chanting in the morning and evening.

**Phichāranā** (Pali: *paccavekhana*), the consideration of the four necessities of life (*paccaya*) before using them. The four *paccaya* consist of *cīvarā* (robes), *piṇḍapāta* (alms food), *senāsana* (lodging), and *bhesajja* (medicine). Pha Khamchan practiced *paccavekhana* before having breakfast by reciting the corresponding chapter in Pali, and also by blessing the lay people who offered him the *paccaya*.

In the context of the Lao tradition, even though *kiccāvata* is practiced by monks or used for their monastic life, some of them cannot be conducted without the support of lay people (e.g. *binthabāt*). *Kiccāvata* are the normal rules every monk has to follow. However, the regular practice is often not easy. A monk who can regularly follow them is considered a good monk; through his conduction he will get faith from the Buddhist lay persons.<sup>17</sup> By practicing the religious routine regularly, Pha

Khamchan was highly respected by both the Sangha and the lay people, particularly in Luang Prabang, but also all over Laos. During his monkhood, he was invited for *Thelabhiseka*<sup>18</sup> (Lao: *konghot*, a devotional ceremony particular to Luang Prabang, where lustral water is poured over the honored monk) for 493<sup>19</sup> times. In that he outnumbers any other monk in the country in past and present, which clearly denotes how highly he was respected, and how steady and consistent his conduct was.

## RECONSTRUCTION OF VAT SAEN SUKHARAM

It is well-known that monasteries are the embodiments of the cultural heritage of Laos, where we can see fine arts, architecture, decorations, objects, rituals, festivals, ceremonies, Buddhist studies etc. Since the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the founding of monasteries and the construction of buildings in monasteries in Luang Prabang was supported by Buddhist laity such as kings, noblemen, merchants and villagers, but in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the reconstruction and construction of monastic buildings in many monasteries in Luang Prabang was led by abbots and senior monks, with permission and sometimes even material or monetary support from the government.

Vat Saen Sukharam, located on Sakkalin Road, Ban Vat Saen, is an ancient monastery and one of the most beautiful monasteries in Luang Prabang. It was founded in C.S. 1080 (A.D.1718) by Ta Chao Hang, a nobleman in the city during the reign of King Kingkitsalat<sup>20</sup> (Illustration Nr. 13). Its initial name was just Vat Saen<sup>21</sup>. In 1953, Pha Khamchan

<sup>18</sup> *Thela* (Lao: *thela*): is generally used for a monk who has ordained more than ten years (Lao: *phansa*); *Abhiseka* is a Pali term meaning "anointing, consecration, or inauguration" of sacred persons and objects, comparable to *puja*, *yagya* and *arati* which denote a devotional activity, an enacted prayer, a rite of passage and/or a religious rite or ritual. *Kong hot* is a local expression and denotes the ceremony of pouring water over a monk's hand/s and offering him new robes. In ancient Lao tradition, this ceremony was held for a monk who received an advanced monk's title. The six ranks are: Pha Samdet, Pha Xa, Pha Khu, Pha Lakkham, Pha Lukkaeo, and Pha Yōtkao (the title for the Supreme Patriarch).

<sup>19</sup> Pha Khamchan collected the certificates of this ceremony in numerical order, but those documents have not been given archive numbers yet, as the working process is still under the way. The first document is dated 16 January 1942, and the last one, Nr. 493, carries the date 8 June 2007 (which was only one month before his passing away). These documents are kept in the Buddhist Archive of Photography in Luang Prabang as primary sources.

<sup>20</sup> Chao Khamman Vongkotrattana. 1964. *"The Legend of monasteries in the city of Luang Prabang"* Vientiane, Viangkung.

<sup>21</sup> *Vat* means monastery, temple. *Saen* means "one hundred thousand" but the name of Vat Saen has two meanings. One is the name of a stone "*kōnsaen*" at the Khan River where its initial founder discovered gold, which he spent for the material of the monastery's first construction. The second is the amount of money of one hundred thousand Kip given by each donor who contributed to the construction of the monastery.

<sup>16</sup> *Āpatti*: ecclesiastical offence; a violation of the disciplines of a Bhikkhu.

<sup>17</sup> Pha One Keo Kittibhaddo recollected Pha Khamchan's advice to him for his further monastic life at Vat Pa Khan 2013. Interview with Pha One Keo Kittibhaddo at Vat Pak Khan on 24 February 2013.





Illustration Nr. 13: Archive Nr. A0400R

Pha Khamchan Virachitto, the later Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela sitting in front of the temple hall (the original one) of Vat Saen Sukharam which was built by Ta Chao Hang of Luang Prabang in 1718.



Illustration Nr. 14: Archive Nr. B0626R

The temple hall (sim) of Vat Saen Sukharam, rebuilt between 1958 and 1962 by Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela, the original one was built in 1718 during the reign of King Kitsarat. The photograph was taken in 1962.



Illustration Nr. 16: Archive Nr. B2588R

Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela is chanting the Vessantara Jataka in Bun Mahaxāt (the festival of Prince Vessantara) at Vat Pa Phon Phao Vanaram in the outskirts of Luang Prabang in the early 1990s. He reads from the Vessantara Jataka book which he published in 1991.

←

Illustration Nr. 15: Archive Nr. B2577R

Pha Khamchan Virachitt Maha Thela is chanting the Vessantara Jataka and the image shows how he holds the palm-leaf manuscript. Pha Khamchan's handwriting on the verso of the photograph "ເທສຢູ່ວັດຜາມີມ ເມື່ອວັນອາທິດ ທີ່ 6 ມັງກອນ 1991 Chanting [Vessantara Jataka] at Vat Phanom [Luang Prabang] on Sunday, 6 January 1991."

added to that name “*Sukharam*” which means “a Buddhist place which is full of happiness”. Since that time it is called Vat Saen Sukharam. To that matter, I found the handwritten draft of an official letter by Pha Khamchan to the Minister of Religious Affairs in Vientiane dated 1<sup>st</sup> of September 1953. It says:

*It is called Vat Saen Sukharam now because I was told by many Pha Thela (great monks) that its initial name was too short and had no meaning [for a Buddhist place]. I added the term “suk” which means a place where those who stay and practice the Dhamma and Vinaya will establish peacefulness in their bodies and minds. The term “āhām” (Buddhist temple building) means that this temple was built as a Buddhist place a long time ago.*<sup>22</sup>

The most prominent building in the monastery is the *sim* (temple hall). The old *sim* of Vat Saen Sukharam was built in the traditional Luang Prabang style (Illustration Nr. 14) and had two sweeping, slightly overlapping roofs, like the *sim* of Vat Xiang Thong. It had three lateral rooms and four diagonal rooms. It had already been repaired for a first time by the late abbot, Pha Kaenchan Kaccāñāna Maha Thela, with support from King Sisavang Vong, in 1932. At that time only some parts of the roof were repaired but the building remained the same.

In 1957, the year of the celebration of 2500 years of Buddhism, Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela rebuilt the *sim* in a unique style, which formed the style of many monastic buildings in Luang Prabang. The building was completely demolished and newly erected. The new one is larger and taller, its architectural styles being mixed.<sup>23</sup> The size is Vientiane style; the two sweeping roofs are built in the style of Luang Prabang, but with a smaller roof in the middle which resembles the style of Xiang Khouang. Its new structure comprises five lateral rooms and six diagonal rooms. Therefore, the *sim* of Vat Saen Sukharam is one of the most captivating and magnificent buildings in the city.

Pha Khamchan was the architect and supervisor of the reconstruction. He did not draw any building plans but he knew how to do it from the experience he got when he learned about the construction of monastic buildings from his master, Pha Kaenchan Kaccāñāna Maha Thela, and another architect monk, Pha Khamfan Silasangvara Maha Thela, abbot of Vat

Suvannakhili, who had studied fine arts in Bangkok in the 1920s. While the old building was demolished, he made the measurements and notes on every piece of wood, and when he designed the roof of the new building, he put a replica of it in front of the building. That was the traditional way of working of Luang Prabang’s monk architects. When he was asked, in the year 2000, by some Lao building officials about the drawing plan used for Vat Saen Sukharam, he said that he had not had one: “I built it according to my experience and imagination”.<sup>24</sup>

Both on its interior and exterior walls the *sim* is magnificently decorated with stencil prints of gold leaf on the background of strong red paint. On the interior walls there are several depictions of famous Buddhist places in the region of Suvannabhumi. They remind of the four places of Buddhist pilgrimage in India and Nepal visited by Pha Khamchan in 1957 and 1968: Lumbini (birthplace), Bodh Gaya (enlightenment), Sarnath (first teaching), and Kusinara (*parinibbāna*). They also show the Shwedagon pagoda in Yangon, Pha Pathom Chedi in Nakhon Pathom province, Haripunjaya in Lamphun province, Pha That Phanom in Nakhon Phanom, Pha That Luang in Vientiane, and Pha Maha That in Luang Prabang. The exterior walls are decorated with flowers and *thevada* and *thepphanom* (gods and goddesses). The frames of its front doors are decorated with magnificent motifs and sculptures of *pathayphet* and *khamuk*.<sup>25</sup> The red paint on the walls of the *sim* is not the normal color sold in the shops or markets; it is a special paint which is made of natural ingredients, the *din daeng*<sup>26</sup> (red soil) and *nammanyang*<sup>27</sup> (oil from the rubber tree). To prepare the paint was a special skill of ancient Luang Prabang craftsmen. Nowadays, very few people know these materials and are able to prepare the paint. Pha Khamchan learned it from his master and from other craftsmen in Luang Prabang. The *sim* of Vat Saen Sukharam in Pha Khamchan’s style is con-

<sup>24</sup> Information from Achan Bounpheng Siudomphan, a foster child of late Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela on 17 March 2013.

<sup>25</sup> *Pathayphet* is produced from the mixture of fine sand, white lime, sugar cane juice, green banana, glue made from buffalo skin, *bai faen* (leaves of sour berry tree), and *kheua samhang* (a sort of vine) (BAD-07-0012, 131–32), and is used for sculptures and architectural decoration. *Khamuk* is produced from a mixture of ash of the Bodhi tree and lacquer: one part of ash and two parts of lacquer are mixed until it becomes glue. *Khamuk* can be used for putting together two objects and fill small holes. *Khamuk* is used for decoration work for Buddha images, important buildings and other sculptures (BAD-07-0012, 133–34).

<sup>26</sup> *Din daeng*, red soil, has to be unearthed two meters under the surface of the ground. The deeper the layers the more red it is. This soil can be found in the region of Ban Pao village, Chomphet district, Luang Prabang province. It is two hours of walking from the city of Luang Prabang (BAD-07-0012, 116).

<sup>27</sup> *Nammanyang* (oil from the rubber tree) can be used for other purposes, e.g., painting it on wood to protect it from animals or as a fuel for making fire (BAD-07-0012, 114).

<sup>22</sup> An official document with Archive Nr. BAD-12-2-1953.082 “...ອັນໜຶ່ງ ທີ່ໄດ້ຮຽກວ່າວັດແສນສຸຂາຣາມນັ້ນ ກໍເນື່ອງຈາກໄດ້ຮັບຄຳແນະນຳຈາກພະເຖລະຫຼາຍອົງວ່າ ຊື່ເກົ່ານີ້ມັນສັ້ນໂພດ ແລະບໍ່ມີຄວາມໝາຍດ້ວຍສູກ ເຂົ້າມາ ໝາຍຄວາມວ່າ ຖ້າຜູ້ໃດຫາກເຂົ້າໄປ ຢູ່ແລ້ວປະພຶດປະຕິບັດຕາມພະທັມວິໄນແລ້ວ ຍອມໄດ້ຮັບຄວາມສະຫງົບສຸກທາງກາຍແລະທາງໃຈ. ທີ່ຕໍ່ທ້າຍວ່າ ອາຣາມ ນັ້ນ ກໍເນື່ອງຈາກວັດນີ້ກໍໄດ້ຕັ້ງເປັນອາຣາມມານານແລ້ວ”...

<sup>23</sup> Archive Nr. B0626R (Illustration Nr. 14), a photograph of the *sim* of Vat Saen Sukharam taken in 1962, while the construction work was still going on. It shows how beautiful the *sim* is.



sidered as the modern Lan Xang style which combined the ancient Lao technique with modern ideas, making it more beautiful and enhancing its stability.

In addition to the *sim*, he did further construction work at Vat Saen Sukharam. He built the brick walls around the monastery between 1953 and 1956, the drum house in 1980, the eighteen-cubit standing Buddha statue between 1972 and 1980, his *kuti* (abode) in 1987, and the big *sala* (pavilion) on the occasion of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2000 (Viradhammo/Boulyaphonh, Khamvone, Pha 2004). He tried to follow the traditional architecture in his constructions; for example, the top of the walls are decorated with *bai sema* in lotus shape which he copied from the ancient wall of Vat Pha Keao in Vientiane. This illustrates his preservationist concept of Lao cultural heritage. Vat Saen Sukharam became a very important monastery after the revolution in 1975, being the seat of the chairman of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization of the province of Luang Prabang from 1976 to 2007. It was as famous as the former royal monastery and former seat of the Supreme Patriarch of Laos, Vat Mai Suwannaphumaram.

Pha Khamchan's efforts related to the construction and reconstruction of monasteries were not restricted to Vat Saen alone. He was also active in other monasteries in Luang Prabang, both in the city and in the countryside, as well as in other provinces of Laos. For instance, he did the reconstruction of the *sim* at Vat Pha That Sikhottabun, Thakhaek district, Khammuan province in 1966. Later, King Sisavang Vatthana (1907–1980) (see Evans 2009, 416) supported him by personally delivering a magnificently decorated wooden door for the main entrance of the *sim* of Vat Pha That Sikhottabun. His construction work at Vat Saen Sukharam had been stimulated by the other abbots who were restoring and constructing the monastic buildings in their monasteries in Luang Prabang. Pha Khamchan often took the high patronage of these works and gave advice and financial support.<sup>28</sup> At present, senior monks are leading lay Buddhists to create and establish monasteries in rural villages of Luang Prabang, i.e., the *sim* of Vat Ban Thin in the area of Nam Xueang River by Pha One Keo Kittibhaddo and the *sim* of Vat Thapaen by Pha Chantharin Jinnadhammo. Both of these senior monks had followed Pha Khamchan for years.

Pha Khamchan was an advisor to the committee of the provincial office dealing with the UNES-

CO world heritage status of Luang Prabang on the question of how to set up an art school for traditional Lao arts and crafts at Vat Xiang Muan Vajiraman-garam in 1998. He initially gave advice where to establish the school, who could be the teachers and who would be the students.<sup>29</sup> Since its creation, the school aims to teach monks, novices and young Lao people the techniques and materials for the production of art objects in the Luang Prabang Lao Lan Xang style.

In addition, people from the countryside asked him for advice and help in finding a concept and for the funding of the construction of their village monasteries. He would then go to see the sites and provide some initial money, saying: "I give you this amount of money for the start of your construction. Now you should participate in funding and continue."<sup>30</sup> Monks who have followed Pha Khamchan's example to this day are Pha One Keo Kittibhaddo/Sittivong, abbot of Vat Pak Khan, Vat Xiang Thong, the chairman of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization of the Province of Luang Prabang, and Pha Chantharin Jinnadhammo, abbot of Vat Phukhouay Phokharam.

## COLLECTIONS OF PHOTOGRAPHS, ART OBJECTS AND DOCUMENTS

Pha Khamchan was considered a great collector monk, as his collections of historic photographs, art objects and documents at Vat Saen Sukharam are unique and special and highly valuable for the history of Buddhism in Laos in the twentieth century, because many of them cannot be found anywhere else, not even in the National Library of Laos. The aim of his collections was clear: we wanted the younger generations to study the history of Buddhism and Laos with the help of these materials. Even though he was not a photographer, he was very interested in photography. Although he owned cameras which were offered to him by lay people, he never used them. He preferred to have his portrait taken every year since his boy hood, which appear in his biography (Viradhammo/Boulyaphonh, Khamvone, Pha 2004). We discovered this extraordinary collection of his portrait-photographs which begins in 1926, when he was six years old, and continued until his death in 2007. When he was a monk, he had a studio portrait taken regularly every year. Thus, these portraits give a unique impression of his life. He used to put some of his studio portraits on the walls of his *kuti*, together with numerous portraits of important

<sup>28</sup> Namely for the restoration of the *sim* at Vat Nong Sikhunmueang between 1963 and 1990 by Pha Phumi Phalapadda Maha Thela (1921–1995), the restoration of *sim* at Vat Maha That Raxabovoravihan in the 1960s by Pha Bunthan Thitapuniño (1920–1967), and the construction of Santi Cedi stupa, (*Pha That Khong Santi Cedi*) at Vat Pa Phon Phao between 1969 and 1987 by Pha Xaysamut Chotika Maha Thela (1927–1992) (Pha One Keo Sittivong and Boulyaphonh Khamvone 2011).

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Mr. Bounkhong Khoutthao, vice director of the world heritage department of the Province of Luang Prabang on 9 March 2013, who was one member of the committee.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Pha Chantharin Jinnadhammo, abbot of Vat Phukhouay Phokharam on 28 February 2013.



monks, personalities and Buddhist places, creating a unique monastic exhibition. He used his collection of photographs as a medium to tell stories about events or personal details when he received his visitors in his *kuti*, while also using them to teach the novices about the Buddhist history of Luang Prabang. Apart from his personal photographs, he collected a large number of photographs related to the monastic life, portraits of other monks, Buddhist places, rituals, and ceremonies in Luang Prabang and other places of Laos. Many of these photographs were taken in the nineteenth century, thus being already historic photographs during Pha Khamchan's lifetime. When the German photographer and writer Hans Georg Berger started his long term project of photographic documentation of sacred ceremonies, festivals and meditation in 1994, Pha Khamchan became his most important partner and advisor for the project.<sup>31</sup>

In 2006, Pha Khamchan and Hans Georg Berger collaborated to establish the Buddhist Archive of Photography in Luang Prabang with the aim of preserving Pha Khamchan's collection of photographs and also the collections of other monasteries. Together with the British Library's *Endangered Archives Programme* and thanks two major research grants attributed to Hans Georg Berger, 35,000 historical photographs from 21 different collections of Luang Prabang's monasteries were assembled and digitized from 2006 to 2011 in the new archive at Sala Thammavihan, Vat Suvannakhili. Here, up to this day, preservation and research are still going on.

What were the reasons for the abundant creation, display and reproduction of monk portraits in Luang Prabang during the twentieth century? The astonishing amount of such portraits assembled in the Buddhist Archive of Photography raises this question. Many great monks had their portrait taken and reproduced photographs that they distributed and offered to other monks who were friends or disciples, as well as to lay people, as souvenirs and for Buddhist worship. We observed how many monks have the portraits of great monks in their rooms in the monasteries, while also the lay people often hang them on the walls of their living rooms and the room where they keep sacred objects, like, e.g., Buddha statues. Since the 1930s, monks popularly used their portraits as souvenirs for friends whom they met during their travels or during their studies at Buddhist institutes of higher education in Thailand, Cambodia and Burma. On the back, these portraits often carry friendly annotations (Berger

and Boulyaphonh 2010, 70) in various languages, such as Lao, Thai, English and French.

In 2004, Pha Khamchan constructed a museum building on the premises of Vat Saen with the aim of preserving and exhibiting the Buddhist art objects from Northern Laos which he collected during his lifetime. He also provided a small budget for the installation of the museum, but since there were no experts with the necessary know-how the building was not used according to his intentions. He used it to store the objects that he had assembled and did not have the time to set up the museum before his passing away. However, upon invitation by the Sangha and the Lao Government, in 2009 a project started with the aim of drawing up a concept for the museum and making a list of endangered art objects in the monasteries of Luang Prabang. It was funded by the German Federal Foreign Office and was carried out from 2009 until 2011, in collaboration with the Buddhist Archive of Photography of Luang Prabang, the Sangha of Luang Prabang, the Department of Information and Culture of the province of Luang Prabang, the National Library of Laos, and the German Embassy in Laos.

## LAO BUDDHIST LITERATURE

### *Vessantara-Jataka*

A master piece of Pha Khamchan's work on Lao literature is his revision of the Vessantara Jataka (*Vessantara xādok*), one of the most popular Jataka in Lao Buddhist literatures, which he transliterated from Lao-Tham manuscripts to a Lao version and published. The Vessantara-Jataka is derived from ancient Indian literature. It is a rather long story with sixteen episodes. The chanting of this Jataka during the Vessantara festival is a very popular practice, not only in Laos but also in Thailand (particularly in the Northeast and North) and in the Shan State of Myanmar. A large number of monasteries through Laos celebrate this three-day festival. The chanting of this piece of Buddhist literature by monks who read it from palm-leaf manuscripts or books takes a central role in it. The festival is one of several annual festivals (*hit sip song*), the so-called *bun pha vet* or *bun mahaxāt*, and is traditionally held in the fourth lunar month (*bun deuane si* or *bun pha vet*) which corresponds to March, although nowadays the festival takes places sometime between November and June. This new flexibility in time is caused by the popularity of the festival and the fact that it needs much preparation by the monasteries and villagers. Its main objective appears to be the raising of funds for the construction of monastic buildings. During the festival, lay Buddhists offer "donation trees" (Lao: *ton kan*) made of bamboo and the wood of banana trees with bank notes at-

<sup>31</sup> The project ran from 1993 to 2007 under the title "*Het Bun Dai Bun*" and produced over 12,000 analog black-and-white photographs. It was part of the Lao-German cultural cooperation and financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany. See: Hans Georg Berger. 2000. "*Het Bun Dai Bun, Sacred Rituals of Luang Prabang*". London, and [www.hansgeorgberger.de](http://www.hansgeorgberger.de).

tached to it. A monastery can also ask for donations from Buddhists by sending *bai khao bun* or *bai phae kusun* (information of merit-making) in envelopes to households. The donors will put their donations in the envelope and hand it to the monastery during the festival.

The core of the Vessantara Jataka is the story of the generous Prince Vessantara, who is seen as the last incarnation of the Buddha before his rebirth as Prince Siddhartha. A second story deals with the future Buddha, Maitreya, who is filled with compassion and whose coming promises the release of all mankind at the end of time (Berger 2000). The content describes Prince Vessantara's great generosity, in that he gave his possessions to others, his two children to an old man for his servants, and his wife to Indra, who appeared as an old man and asked for her. His generosity is considered as *dāna paramatthapāramī* (giving as supreme perfection), which Bodhisattva, who wishes to be enlightened and become the future Buddha, must follow.

Pha Khamchan corrected, edited and revised the locution in a proper and correct way according to Lao pronunciation, published it in a first edition in 1977 and later reproduced it many times. It is the second Lao version of the Vessantara Jataka since the first version was composed by Maha Sila Viravong and published in 1962. Pha Khamchan's transliteration and publication of the Vessantara Jataka in the Lao version had the aim of making the Vassanantara Jataka available to those who are interested in it but cannot read the Lao-Tham script in which the palm-leaf manuscripts are written. In his preface for the first edition he says:

*I would like to preserve our Lao literature, and have tried to revise and correct this piece of [Lao] literature as to my attentiveness and wisdom and with the aim of giving it pleasant Phase, correct orthography and [correct and pleasant] verses. For the correction I chose the original manuscripts of Vat Saen which are commonly used. I found that they have a good sound and I use them often. I also compared them with other original manuscripts which have similar expressions and then chose the ones I consider to be correct and preserved the original expressions.*

*The original version was in [Lao]-Tham script. This publication is in Lao script for those who cannot read [Lao]-Tham script. I tried to correct the Pali words by following the "Gathāphan"<sup>32</sup> scripture but it was difficult to write them because the Lao alphabet does not have letters corresponding to all Pali characters, so I used just the available letters.<sup>33</sup>*

<sup>32</sup> The composition of the series of 1,000 chapters of the Vessantara Jataka in Pali.

<sup>33</sup> Khamchan Virachitta Thela, Pha 1977: "ຂ້າພະເຈົ້າຢາກຈະຮັກສາວັນນະຄະດີລາວເຮົາໄວ້ ຈຶ່ງໄດ້ພະຍາຍາມກວດຊໍາລະສະສາງວັນນະຄະດີເລື່ອງນີ້ໄວ້ຕາມສະຕິປັນຍາແລະເພື່ອຈະໃຫ້ໄດ້ສໍານວນອັນມ່ວນແລະ

Pha Khamchan's sound and tune for chanting the Vessantara Jataka were unique. It was called *thet siangmuan* (preaching in good sound). He learned, trained and practiced the tempo of Vessantara Jataka chanting with his master, Pha Kaenchana Kaccānana Maha Thela, and lay masters in Luang Prabang from the time he was a novice in the 1930s. He told me that his first Vessantara Jataka was on the event of the Vessantara festival (*bun mahāxāt*) of Vat Pa Phay in 1937. At that time, he was invited by his master to do the chanting as his representative. He could not reject this order because of his respect for him, although he was well aware that he had no experience in that matter. In the short time for practicing he tried hard. When the day came, he could chant very smoothly. The episode he chanted was "*kan nakhòn* or *lakhòn*"<sup>34</sup>, and the Buddhist lay people offered him "*kan lòn*"<sup>35</sup>, offerings in a big bamboo basket full of many kinds of fruits, local snacks, money and other things, so heavy that it had to be carried by two persons.

In the three years (1938-1941) when he had disrobed to help in his family's business, he continued to be interested in chanting the Vessantara. When he was in a good mood, he often muttered it during his daily work. This habit was quite different from that of the other boys who loved to sing a song. After his ordination as a monk, he continued to train and develop the tune of Vessantara Jataka chanting and eventually created his own style. The Vessantara Jataka has emotional episodes. It was often presented in a very theatrical way, causing the audience to cry tears or burst out in laughter. Pha Khamchan considered this way to present it improper for monks. In his opinion, monks should show more respect to a story about the Bodhisattva. Furthermore, monks should not cause their audience to feel too strong emotions. Pha Khamchan's style was a middle course. It did not make the audience laugh out loud or cry, but was nonetheless captivating and made them smile or slightly sad. Pha One Keo Kittibhad-do, one of his disciples whom he trained in Vessantara chanting, said:

ຖືກຕ້ອງຕາມອັກສອນແລະບົດກອນ ຂ້າພະເຈົ້າຈຶ່ງໄດ້ເລືອກເອົາຕົ້ນສະບັບທີ່ມີຢູ່ກັບວັດແສນສຸຂາຣຸນ ຊຶ່ງເປັນສະບັບທີ່ນິຍົມເທສະໜາກັນຢູ່ເປັນປະຈຳ ເຫັນວ່າ ມ່ວນດີ ທັງຂ້າພະເຈົ້າກໍເຄີຍໄດ້ ເທສະໜາມາແລ້ວນັ້ນເປັນຫຼັກແລ້ວໂດຍກວດທຽບຄຽງກັບສະບັບອື່ນໆ ອີກຊຶ່ງມີສໍານວນໂວທານຄາຍຄືກັນແລ້ວເລືອກເອົາ ສະເພາະທີ່ຖືກຕ້ອງເປັນປະມານ ແລະໄດ້ຮັກສາສໍານວນໂວທານເດີມໂວທຸກປະການ". "ສ່ວນສະບັບເດີມເປັນອັກສອນທໍາທີ່ໄດ້ຈັດພິມເປັນອັກສອນລາວນີ້ ກໍເພື່ອໃຫ້ຜູ້ທີ່ບໍ່ໄດ້ອັກສອນທໍາອານໄດ້ທົ່ວໄປ ສ່ວນຄໍາ ບາລີໄດ້ແກ້ໄຂ ໃຫ້ຖືກຕ້ອງຕາມຄໍາພິຄາຖາພັນການຂຽນເປັນອັກສອນລາວຈະຖືກຕ້ອງຕາມບາລີໄດ້ ເພາະຕົວອັກສອນລາວບໍ່ມີຄືບຕາມອັກສອນບາລີ ຈຶ່ງໄດ້ຂຽນຕາມອັກສອນລາວເທົ່າທີ່ມີ".

<sup>34</sup> Final chapter of the Vessantara Jataka. The sixteenth episode tells the story when Prince Vessantara left the forest for his home town.

<sup>35</sup> *Kan lòn* were offerings that villagers participating in the donation carried around their village in a procession before taking them to the temple and offering them to a monk or novice who was preaching at the moment of their arrival. *Kan* means a basket for offerings or a donation tree. *Lòn* means to leave and arrive without warning.

*The tone of Pha Khamchan's voice and the tune of his Vessantara chanting sounded softly, neither too fast nor too slow, and it was perspicuous. It was acknowledged and appreciated by the audience and the Sangha community and became the Luang Prabang style in the twentieth century.*<sup>36</sup>

Many monasteries in the town and in the countryside of Luang Prabang who held the Vessantara festival invited Pha Khamchan to be the head of committee for the festival and chant the Vessantara Jataka. The episodes he loved the most were Kumāra and Maddi. They describe how Maddi (Prince Vessantara's wife), after he had given his two children to the old man and she could not find them, fainted and nearly died. These episodes are considered as very sad. One reason why Pha Khamchan was invited to chant Vessantara Jataka at their festivals was because the audience loved to listen to his voice. Illustration Nr. 15 and 16 show Pha Khamchan chanting.

In the present day, Pha One Keo Kittibhaddo and Pha Buavan Puññasāro, abbot of Vat Naxao, can re-create the style of Vessantara chanting established by Pha Khamchan. In 2002, Pha Khamchan received an invitation from his relatives in Paris for a visit of three months; he was invited to chant all sixteen episodes of the Vessantara Jataka there and his voice was recorded.<sup>37</sup> In 2007, I printed the last version of his Vessantara book in preparation of his 87<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration on 21 October 2007; unfortunately, he passed away before that date. Pha Khamchan's edition of the Vessantara Jataka has been acknowledged by Lao scholars. It is extensively used in Laos, particularly in the Northern provinces. The publication was useful for lay Buddhists who could not listen to Vessantara chanting in the monasteries during the Vessantara festival, and was a modern way of spreading Buddhist teachings and literature to the Buddhists in Laos.

## CREATOR AND SPONSOR OF PALM-LEAF MANUSCRIPTS

In addition, in 1990 Pha Khamchan composed an important palm-leaf manuscript (BAD-13-1-0287) in Lao script for Prince Suphanouvong (1909–1995), the president of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao P.D.R.) (1975–1995). This was done on the occasion when Prince Suphanouvong

and his wife, Mrs. Viangkham, hosted a Buddhist merit-making ceremony commemorating the 31<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the death of his half-brother, Prince Phetsarat Rattnavongsa. The ceremony took place on 15 October 1990. The manuscript has only two palm-leaf folios (inscribed recto and verso), but its text is very important with regards to the biography of Prince Phetsarat Rattnavongsa, one of the most important Lao political leaders of the 20th century. The text says:

*Somdet Chao Maha Uparat Phetsarat Rattnavongsa was one of the sons of Somdet Chao Maha Uparat (viceroy) Bunkhong and Princess Thongsī. He was born on Sunday, the fourteenth day of the waning moon of the first month in the year B.E.2432. [This date corresponds to] the 19 January 1890. [...] In 1918, he received the royal rank of the title: Chao Laxaphakhinai. [...] In 1941, he was offered a promotion by King Sisavang Vong who bestowed upon him the royal position of Somdet Chao Maha Uparat and the rank of akkhamahā senābòdi (Prime Minister) to govern the country. [...] He became very sick on Wednesday, the twelfth day of the waxing moon of the tenth month in the year B.E.2502. [This date corresponds to] the 14 January 1959 [of the Gregorian calendar]. At the time before midnight of that day, there occurred an earthquake and heavy rainfall. He passed away due to high blood pressure at 5.30 a.m., three months and eighteen days before reaching the age of 70, at Xiang Kaeo palace. His funeral was held at the That Luang field in Luang Prabang on the 12<sup>th</sup> day of the waxing moon of the 12<sup>th</sup> month in the same year [...].*<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, Pha Khachan was also a donor (*phu sāng*) who supported the production of many palm-leaf and mulberry paper manuscripts related to Buddhist literature that were offered to the monasteries. In this context, I want to refer to the upcoming working paper of Bunleuth Sengsulin on “The Lao Sangha of Luang Prabang and its Social Role in the Post-1975 Period” that will be posted on the DORISEA website. Supporting the production of palm-leaf manuscripts was a custom in traditional Buddhist Lao society, particularly in Luang Prabang

<sup>36</sup> Information from Pha One Keo Kittibhaddo/Sitthivong, abbot of Vat Pak Khan and Vat Xiang Thong, the chairman of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization of the district of Luang Prabang on 24 February 2013.

<sup>37</sup> Information from Pha Ounkham Aggapañño/Souksavathdy, one of Pha Khamchan's close disciples, at Vat Pa Pha O, Luang Prabang on 5 March 2013, who is now living in Vat Lao Buddhist temple of Visalia, California, U.S.A.

<sup>38</sup> A palm-manuscript with Archive Nr. BAD-13-1-0287: “ສົມເດັດເຈົ້າອຸປະຣາຊ ເພັດຊະຣາຊ ຣັດຕະນະວົງສາ ຜູ້ເປັນພະໂອຣົດຂອງສົມເດັດເຈົ້າມະຫາອຸປະຣາຊ, ບຸນຄົງ ແລະເຈົ້າຍິງທອງສີຊົງປະສູດເມື່ອວັນອາທິດ ແຮມ 14 ຄໍ່າ ເດືອນ ຍີ່ ພ.ສ. 2432. ວັນທີ 19 ມັງກອນ ຄ.ສ.1890 [...] ປີ 1918 ຈຶ່ງໄດ້ຮັບພະຣາຊະທານຍຶດເປັນເຈົ້າຣາຊະພາຄີໄນ [...] ປີ ຄ.ສ. 1941 ພະບາດສົມເດັດພະເຈົ້າສີສະຫວາງວົງຊົງ ພະຣາຊະທານເລື່ອນຍຶດຂຶ້ນເປັນສົມເດັດເຈົ້າມະຫາອຸປະຣາຊ ດຳລົງພະຕຳແໜ່ງອັກຄະມະຫາເສນາບໍດີ ບໍລິຫານປະເທດ ບານເມືອງ [...] ວັນພຸດ ຂຶ້ນ 12 ຄໍ່າ ເດືອນ 11 ປີກັດໂຄ່ ພ.ສ. 2502 ວັນທີ 14 ຕຸລາ 1959 ຊົງປະຊວນ ເວລາໂກທຸງ ກາງຄືນເກີດແຜນດິນໄຫວແລ້ວຝົນຕົກ ຄັນຮອດເວລາ 5 ໂມງ 30 ນາທີ ໄດ້ສິ້ນພະຊົນດ້ວຍໂຮກຄວາມດັນໂລຫິດສູງ ໂຮມພະຊົນມາຍຸໄດ້ 70 ປີ ພຸດ 3 ເດືອນ 18 ມື້ ທີ່ ວັງຊຸງແກວ ໄດ້ແທພະສົບມາຖວາຍພະເພັງທີ່ເດີນທາດຫຼວງ ໃນມື້ຂຶ້ນ 12 ຄໍ່າ ເດືອນ 12 ໃນປີດຸວກັນນັ້ນ [...]”.



and considered as highly meritorious, a deed generating good karma.

## CONCLUSION

Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela was trained in the way of Lao Buddhist life since his early youth. Growing up in the environment of Buddhist culture, he was expected to become a Buddhist monk only for one year, but stayed in the Sangha until the end of his life. He spent his life preserving the Lao Buddhism and ancient Lao cultural heritage, building a bridge between ancient Lao Buddhist culture (1357–1975) and modern Laos (1976–present).

He played a key role in the preservation of the Lao cultural heritage. The fruits of his reconstruction and embellishment of Vat Saen Sukharam and his support of the construction of other monasteries in Luang Prabang and in Laos are lasting to this day. His publications on monastic disciplines, Buddhist teachings and Lao literature continue to enlighten monks, novices and lay people alike. He established a large collection of Buddhist arts and crafts from Luang Prabang and Northern Laos with the aim of creating a museum at Vat Saen Sukharam (Sitthivong and Boulyaphonh 2010, 85), and founded the “Buddhist Archive of Photography” in Luang Prabang. The architectural knowledge that he learned from his Buddhist master, his preceptor, and from great Lao craftsmen in Luang Prabang, seems greatly astonishing to contemporary Lao architects. The technique of modifying the ancient Lao style into a modern Lao style according to his own ideas, is regarded as the creation of the contemporary Luang Prabang style. Exemplary of it is the restoration of the temple hall in Vat Saen Sukharam which he initiated. He did not simply imitate the ancient Lao styles and techniques, but modified and mixed them, thereby creating a unique and modern style.

Another case in point is the composition of the Lao version of the Vessantara Jataka which he compiled from various sections of ancient palm-leaf and mulberry paper manuscripts and slightly modified by establishing the sound and tune for chanting Vessantara Jataka in his own style which is now very popular in Luang Prabang.

The late abbot was well known as a monk who strictly practiced the monastic discipline. His practice of *kiccāvata* was recognized as exemplary by monks and lay Buddhists alike, which caused him to be highly respected by the Buddhist community. Therefore, the Sangha and the lay people of Luang Prabang regarded him as their spiritual leader, and today he is considered as one of the important personalities of Lao Buddhism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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#### Interviews

**PHA KHAMCHAN VIRACHITTA MAHA THELA** at Vat Saen Sukharam in August 2006 and the first half of 2007.

**PHA ONE KEO KITTIBHADDH/SITTHIVONG**, abbot of Vat Pak Khan Khammungkhun and Vat Xiang Thong Rajavolavihan, Chairman of the Buddhist Fellow-

ship Organization of the province of Luang Prabang at Vat Pak Khan on 24 February 2013.

**PHA CHANTHARIN JINNADHAMMO**, abbot of Vat Phukhouay Phokharam, Vice Chairman of the Buddhist Fellowship Organization of the province of Luang Prabang, at Vat Phukhouay on 28 February 2013.

**PHA OUNKHAM AGGAPAÑÑO/SOUKSAVATHDY**, a close disciple of Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela at Vat Pa Pha O, Luang Prabang on 5 March 2013. Pha Ounkham is now living at Vat Lao Buddhist temple of Visalia, California, the United States of America.

**ACHAN BOUNPHENG SIUDOMPHAN**, foster child of the late Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela at Ban Phonhueang, Luang Prabang on 9 March 2013. Achan Bunpheng had been a novice and stayed with Pha Khamchan in Vat Saen Sukharam since 1953 and had been a monk between 1962 and 1977. Pha Khamchan loved him as his foster child and sent him to study at Buddhist Institutes of Higher Education in Vientiane, Laos, Thailand and India.

**MR. BOUNKHONG KHOUTTHAO**, Deputy Director of the Department of World Heritage of the Province of Luang Prabang at Ban Ma, Luang Prabang on 9 March 2013.